

# Montgomery school board pushes to allow bus fees

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The Montgomery County school board will push for legislation that would allow the county to charge students bus fees.

When it meets with the county's state lawmakers Tuesday night, the board also plans to endorse bills that would give the county government authority over school building permits and allow the student school board member to vote on the capital budget.

The board voted 7-1 to support Sen. Richard Madaleno Jr.'s effort to lift a 1997 state law forbidding bus fees specifically in Montgomery County.

"Recognizing the dire situation that state and local governments are going to be facing from a budget standpoint in the next two to four years, we have to start having these conversations," Madaleno said.

County Board of Education President Patricia O'Neill pointed out that Montgomery is the only county in Maryland where the fees are prohibited, "and if the ban is repealed it doesn't necessarily mean fees will be charged."

"I don't know how bad our budget hole is going to get this year or next year," O'Neill said.

Dissenting board member Laura Berthiaume said she was worried that bus fees, which would affect only students attending schools outside their consortium, would put a price tag on magnet schools, gifted centers and language immersion sites.

"It raises the larger question of: Do you want to have two unequal school systems, one that you have to buy your way into?" Berthiaume said.

Berthiaume also voiced dissent in the board's 7-1 approval of Madaleno's proposal to take the power to authorize school expansion away from municipalities and give it to the county. The school board has long butted

heads with Rockville over expansion; recently, Superintendent Jerry Weast approved two portable classrooms at College Gardens Elementary School after the city denied the request.

Rockville Mayor Phyllis Marcuccio said Rockville has a more stringent definition of "overcrowded" than the school board. "We have limitations in traffic ... If you overcrowd schools, you can't get in and out of roads," Marcuccio said.

Madaleno said it was unfair for Rockville to claim separate regulations: "Municipalities shouldn't be able to jump in and say, 'Our schools deserve to be less crowded than schools in an unincorporated part of the county.'"

The board unanimously supported expanding the vote of the student board member -- currently Richard Montgomery High School junior Alan Xie -- to budgetary issues and the closing and opening of schools. "It's an important student rights bill," said Del. Tom Hucker, D-Silver Spring, the bill's co-sponsor. "If you give [students] more responsibility, they'll rise to the challenge."